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SHPO Partnership with Harpers Ferry

As the crow flies, the West Virginia State Historic Preservation Office seems within easy reach of its National Park Service partner, the Harpers Ferry National Historical Park. However, the mountains of West Virginia make any field trip to the eastern panhandle where the park is located seem like a trip to Oz. By car, the trip to Harpers Ferry from our office in Charleston is almost a six-hour sojourn and one must travel through Virginia or Maryland to reach this corner of the state. At the end of the journey one descends into the hollow between the triangle of mountains at the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers. Nestled in the hills is Lower Town, the core of the park.

The principal themes of interpretation at Harpers Ferry focus on the cultural resources which are located primarily within Lower Town and Virginus Island and extant from the Civil War occupation by both Confederate and Union troops and John Brown's raid on the arsenal. Surrounding the park are farms and small towns that represent the antebellum history of the state. Once a rural, agriculturally-based area, Jefferson County is now one of the fastest developing counties in the state due to its close proximity to the greater Washington, DC area. Not only does our office work with the park to review activities that affect the cultural resources within its confines, but in partnership with the park staff have confronted issues that affect it from outside its perimeter.

This dual role has developed a team spirit; at Harpers Ferry one is greeted by a friendly "hello." Although for the last eight years I have met "across the table" from the park representing the SHPO in the Section 106 review process, I feel that my colleagues at the park are allies in the preservation of the history of this corner of the state regardless of whether it is meeting during a formal Section 106 review, sharing technical information and advice, or addressing county preservation issues.

Ironically, the State of West Virginia once owned portions of the Lower Town. In the early 1950s, the state began purchasing land in Harpers Ferry following the authorization of the Harpers

Ferry National Monument by Congress in 1944. By December 1953, the National Park Service completed acquisition from the state, and the park was readied for public use. The habit of cooperation was set in place from the beginning of the park.

One of the first Section 106 case projects assigned to me at the SHPO was the reconstruction of "Building 14," the Alfred Burton Jewelry Shop, located on the lower portion of High Street. From 1858 to 1861 and after the Civil War, it carried "...a full assortment of Watches and Jewelry, Repairing was also done." In 1956, the building was dismantled and placed in storage until the end of 1989. When funding became available, the park considered its return to the streetscape of High Street important to finish the story of 19th-century commercial activity in town. Its return to the street from the warehouse became an official review and was submitted to our office by the National Capital Regional Office. Its restoration on the original site was considered to have "no adverse effect" on the historic characteristics of the building or the park. The building is now an exhibit displaying scales and a variety of original equipment and wares from the shop returned to the park.

Subsequent to that project, our office became involved in public hearings regarding proposed water lines associated with a townhouse development immediately outside the park boundary. Although the park is protected by a legal boundary, the encroaching development surrounding it in Jefferson County affects its setting and context. Testifying in front of an administrative judge for the West Virginia Public Service Commission, I explained the newly-passed state review process for undertakings that were funded, permitted, or licensed by the state. Defending newly-written legislative rules to a disbelieving applicant was a challenge. It was new to me, too. As a result, the hearing proved successful as an opportunity to test the state law as a way to protect the fringes of the park near Schoolhouse Ridge. Ultimately, the developer's property was purchased by the Civil War Trust and the townhouses were not built.

Later, the replacement of the c.1949 US Route 340 Harpers Ferry Bridge outside the park was identified as having a substantial visual impact on the park. This two-lane bridge which crosses the Shenandoah River east of Virginus Island had deteriorated and required repair or replacement. Early planning discussions were initiated among all parties of the Section 106 review process. Consultation occurred among our office, the park, the West Virginia Division of Highways, the Federal Highway Administration, and the

Advisory Council on Historic Preservation to develop a Memorandum of Understanding.

This agreement established guidelines for the development and construction of the project that were later incorporated into the Section 106 review process. The key stipulations of the agreement confirmed that the Division of Highways would limit the bridge to a two-lane structure whether repaired or replaced. Later in the review process the bridge design alternatives addressed the potential impacts by the road cut to the viewsheds from the park. Also evaluated were impacts to additional mid-19th-century structures in Bolivar outside the park boundary. A Phase I archeological survey was conducted; no subsurface sites were identified. The review of the project identified eligible standing structures in Bolivar, but determined that there was no effect to cultural resources.

The SHPO and the park have also provided peer assistance to each other on a variety of other joint projects. During the last few years, the state has developed a fall Archaeology Week. This event has included educational activities throughout the state promoting awareness of archeology. Harpers Ferry NHP has been a venue for talks and site visits for the public publicizing the archeological surveys conducted within the park. For example, in October 1993, the park's Archeology Division conducted a "behind the scenes" tour of the Lower Town, Virginus Island, and laboratory facilities. Public comments after the tour were enthusiastic over the opportunity to meet with the archeologists, see the historic sites on Virginus Island, and examine the artifacts retrieved for curation in the labs.

This past January, our staff also met with park staff to evaluate flood damage. The heavy snows and thaws of the 1996 winter caused the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers to reach flood levels, threatening the low lying areas of Harpers Ferry. Already scheduled to visit the eastern panhandle to evaluate a highway project, we notified the park that SHPO staff would be in the area and could come to the park. We were welcomed and shown the emptied exhibit buildings of Lower Town which had been evacuated in the middle of the night before the water crested. Maintenance staff was still hosing out mud that had entered with the flood waters. We donned boots provided by the park staff and trudged out to Virginus Island to examine blow-outs that had occurred to

the historic mill foundations. The efforts of park staff to protect the exhibits were impressive; we were only able to provide moral support, the park had already averted the worst of the damage.

Our office also provided letters of concern to the Jefferson County Planning Commission during a recent development project that destroyed Civil War earthworks outside park boundaries. These earthworks were constructed by General Phil Sheridan's troops for the defense of Harpers Ferry in 1863. Our office could only provide unsolicited expert advice to the county; this was clearly a local matter without federal or state involvement. We interfered as unabrasively as possible. However, neither our office nor the park could prevent their destruction.

Because of the distance to the eastern panhandle, our office sometimes relies on local contacts to keep up-to-date with local activities. Recently, the local planning commission evaluated the feasibility of an addition to the Jefferson County Courthouse located in nearby Charles Town. The courthouse is the site where John Brown's trial took place following his capture in Harpers Ferry. As a result, the park staff has great interest in the historic character of the courthouse and kept us informed about the proposed addition even though we were unable to attend a public hearing on the matter. At the moment, lack of funds has led to the indefinite postponement of the courthouse addition.

Charles Town and Shepherdstown, both near Harpers Ferry, now participate in the Certified Local Government program. (The Town of Harpers Ferry is currently not involved.) It is possible that these communities, the county, our office, and the park could create a peer assistance network to provide training and support regarding preservation issues. For it is clear that the development of Jefferson County will continue around the park and will affect the cultural landscape of the county. In the next few years, our two offices should evaluate the possibilities of working with the community to identify and protect its cultural resources. This ultimately will serve both the cultural resources of Harpers Ferry NHP and its neighbors.

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